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Some literary perspectives

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“My experience as a teacher has rubbed into me the enormous difference between knowing a subject and knowing about it.”¹

So wrote the Scottish theologian John Oman (1860-1939) in a typescript Memorandum from his time as Principal at Westminster College, Cambridge, responding to a question about how broad the curriculum for theological colleges should be. It was Oman’s settled conviction that developing depth and authenticity of understanding in the areas of Biblical Studies, Church History and Theology should be the aim of theological education, particularly for those entering ministry.

Many of the conversations I have had the pleasure of sharing with Professor Iain Torrance have revolved around the topics of knowing and living the truths of the faith, and nurturing these attributes in theological education. Iain was kind enough to write up his paper from a conference in Pittsburgh Theological Seminary for publication in *The Expository Times* when I was the editor, exploring the relationship between his father’s theology of ministry and emerging issues for the Church around ordination.² Maintaining the Pittsburgh connection, he graciously agreed to contribute to the new Doctor of Ministry programme set up in collaboration between the University of Edinburgh’s School of Divinity and Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, in which I was involved as Programme Co-Director. His block of teaching included reflections on such pressing issues as the ordination of gay people, the relationship between consecration and authorisation to perform certain functions in the name

¹ John Oman, Typescript “Memorandum” at Westminster College, Cambridge, quoted in Alan P.F. Sell, “Living in the Half Lights: John Oman in Context”, in *The Theological Education of the Ministry: Soundings in the British Reformed and Dissenting Traditions* (Eugene, Or: Pickwick Publications, 2013), pp. 84-153, p. 108.

² Iain R. Torrance, “Thomas F. Torrance’s Theology of Ministry and the Pressing Issues of Today”, in *The Expository Times* 124.11, pp. 521-529.

of Christ (and the pressures which result from this) and the role of sacraments in the life and worship of the Church. Lived, realized theology was at the heart of his contribution, and the minister-students responded positively to the challenges he raised with them. Finally, Iain and I have shared many conversations about literature and the way in which theology may be reflected and refracted through fiction. We discovered we share a deep appreciation for the writing of Marilynne Robinson, whose depiction of the inner life of the Rev John Ames in her novel *Gilead* is surely one of the most compellingly attractive portrayals of ordained ministry in all of literature.³ We have both had the privilege of meeting Marilynne Robinson, and of appreciating her commitment to presenting deep theological reflection in the lived experience of her characters. In this essay, Iain's long commitment to preparing ministers to know deeply the theological nature and significance of their calling will be explored through some of these interests we have shared.

Two resources will be drawn upon to promote this exploration. The first is Iain Torrance's contribution to the Opening Convocation of Princeton Theological Seminary in 2004, published in *Theology Today*.⁴ Here, in conversation with Dr Jonathan Sacks' work, Torrance considers the adequacy of spatial images to explore moral, theological and ethical issues. He concludes:

Ultimately,... I used to believe that Christian ethics was fundamentally to do with geography, with map-making and boundaries, and so was related to a spatial imagination. Increasingly now, I believe it has to do with being transformed, and that neither universalism nor prescription is its method.⁵

To illustrate his argument, Torrance offers an example from fiction, from Walter Scott's novel *The Heart of Midlothian* (1818). The novel invokes the true story of a woman who

³ Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (London: Virago, 2005).

⁴ Iain R. Torrance, "More than Regent's Park?", in *Theology Today* 61 (2005), pp. 447-54.

⁵ Torrance, "More than Regent's Park?", p. 452.

refused to tell a lie under oath, even although this would save her sister's life, and who then walked to London to beg a pardon for her sister from King George II. For Torrance, the story embodies the relationship between applying hard, inflexible truth and acting in love to persuade an unsympathetic king to show mercy. "Essentially", he suggests, the novel "is a narrational account of how grace and truth, which are so often polarized, may properly be brought together",⁶ just as they are in the Prologue to John's Gospel, and in the Hebrew Bible's frequent reference to "grace and truth". Torrance argues that this transformed way to be is a vision of his hope for the Seminary where he is to serve as its sixth President. Such co-operation of grace and truth resists a mode of living which is purely functional and based on the temptations Jonathan Sacks had identified in the early years of the 21st Century: greed, relativism, consumption, disregard of the other. It offers a compelling aim for theological education which transcends the particular. And it finds its resonance, its public and imaginative embodiment of possibility, in literature as a way to know, rather than know about.

Emboldened by Torrance's use of Scott's *The Heart of Midlothian*, my second resource is Robinson's *Gilead* itself. The novel takes the form of a letter or reflection written by an aged father, the Rev John Ames, to his seven-year-old son, his child with his second wife whom he married late in life. Ames' ministry in Gilead has been his only charge, in the Congregational Church, and he writes of his lifelong friendship with his fellow (Presbyterian) minister, Boughton. The return of Boughton's prodigal son, Jack, Ames' godson and namesake, provokes much of the theological struggle in the novel, as Ames moves from being unable to accept Jack's motives for return, to blessing him as he leaves. The novel

⁶ Torrance, "More than Regent's Park?", p. 453.

repays deep consideration on many levels, but it is its narrative reflection on a theology of ministry which will be the focus here.

While Torrance ultimately finds spatial metaphors inadequate, I hope he would agree with Robinson herself who argues in “Onward, Christian Liberals”, that creating a space for understanding, mutuality and defending theological reflection is central to a Reformed view of ministry, and Christian life in general. In contrast to those who assert creedal orthodoxy and demand unwavering acceptance of biblical “truths”, Robinson writes:

It is worth remembering that ... a common, non-judgmental space is fully consistent with faithful doubt, as it were, which has not only the very humane consequence of allowing us to live together in peace and mutual respect, but also a strong theological and scriptural grounding. It is first of all the responsibility of liberal or mainline Protestants to remember this, because insofar as it is an aspect of their tradition, they should understand it and be able to speak for it. A very great deal depends on its being understood and defended.⁷

In *Gilead*, this common, non-judgemental space is explored and defended at various points. The porches of Ames’ and Boughton’s houses offer space for debate and reflection more often and more authentically than their churches, although Ames meets Jack there too. The quiet of an evening on Ames’ porch is the place where Jack and Ames renew their earlier discussion about Karl Barth and predestination which had taken place at Boughton’s. It is the space in which, Ames asserts, “in the dark and the quiet I felt I could forget all the tedious particulars and just feel the presence of his [Jack’s] mortal and immortal being”.⁸ This is possible, in such a quiet space, because: “[t]he idea of grace had been so much on my mind, grace as a sort of ecstatic fire that takes things down to essentials”. The insight comes, in the space created between the characters on the porch, because the theological truth had been

⁷ Marilynne Robinson, “Onward, Christian Liberals” in *American Scholar* 75.2 (Spring 2006), pp. 42-51, p. 51.

⁸ Robinson, *Gilead*, p. 227.

given space and time in Ames' interior life. His being present when his wife and Jack continue to discuss the issue, although they think he is asleep, allows him to hear the reassurance that his wife finally feels at home in the space they have created together, and to hear her bless Jack⁹ from a position of solidarity that he has not shared. The space has drawn Jack in to experience what he has longed for ("a settled life"), when he had been planning just to "look in people's window's at night and wonder what it was like".¹⁰ In a profound but very understated way, transformative, relational, respectful theological reflection has taken place in the space Ames' porch represents: a place with deep roots in its community, earned by his presence with them through adversity, and made sacred by his life of prayerful grappling with issues which are not self-evident.¹¹

Robinson's novel, then, embodies and promotes an understanding of the theological value of space to test and develop prayerful reflection in the company of others. This value in the novel is underscored by the access given to the reader into Ames' formation and ongoing development as a minister of Word and Sacrament. In his *Expository Times* article, Torrance reflected on his father's understanding of the new order which came into the world with Jesus Christ, and towards which ministry is to be orientated through "participation in the obedience of Christ":¹² "this order is something which is creative, joyful, obedient yet not submissive or

⁹ "'Well,' she said, and her voice was very gentle, 'well, Jack, bless your heart.'" (p. 228).

¹⁰ Robinson, *Gilead*, p. 228.

¹¹ In the second novel of the Gilead trilogy, *Home* (London: Virago, 2008), Boughton's daughter Glory offers a contrasting perspective on faithful space. She shares with Jack a sense of failure about her hopes and dreams of family, and decides to stay in the family house after the death of their father, to maintain a home for Jack's son. As Rebecca M. Painter comments, hers is the "solitary grace of loyalty", and Glory represents "nurturers quietly prodigal in sustaining homes for others". Divine acceptance and mercy is firmly placed in her human, and female, hands. See Painter, "Loyalty Meets Prodigality: The Reality of Grace in Marilynne Robinson's Fiction", in *Christianity and Literature* 59.2 (Winter 2010), pp. 321-340, p. 336.

¹² Torrance, "Thomas F. Torrance's Theology of Ministry", p. 524.

crushed. It is to do with living at something's full potential."¹³ Robinson has written about personal holiness which reflects something of this longing for divine order:

We baffled creatures are immersed in an overwhelming truth. What is plainly before our eyes we know only in glimpses and through disciplined attention...[T]o attempt obedience to God in any circumstance is to find experience opening on meaning, and meaning is holy.¹⁴

In *Gilead*, Ames' attempt to live obediently to God is presented in the thematic and narrative interplay between his experience and his search for meaning, leading to a personal holiness which informs his ministry. Deeply aware that unbelief has its own possibilities and logic, Ames makes it a rule to say nothing publicly about belief which would sound insincere to a well-loved but sceptical listener such as his brother Edward.¹⁵ However, he does not equate the difficulty of defining God with an assumption that God does not exist. The drive to bring understanding and order into his life, and that of his congregation, involves creative, joyful, obedient attention, exercising his full potential intellectually and pastorally. That intellectual potential may be exercised anywhere, even in an unremarkable and out-of-the-way place such as Gilead: Ames responds to his father's judgement about the restrictions of the place he calls home with the exclamation that "I had read Owen and James and Huxley and Swedenborg and, for heaven's sake, Blavatsky".¹⁶ The intellectual is developed alongside the sharing of experiences which ministry opens up, even when pastoral care involves bringing order to the labelling of kitchen taps: Ames responds to such a call for help from an elderly widow ("You can never know what troubles or fears such people have") and is "repaid" by his wife's companionable laughter when he recounts the story.¹⁷ For Ames, experience brings meaning and meaning is holy. As Amy Hungerford comments:

¹³ Torrance, "Thomas F. Torrance's Theology of Ministry", p. 523.

¹⁴ Robinson, "Onward, Christian Liberals", p. 43.

¹⁵ Robinson, *Gilead*, p. 175.

¹⁶ Robinson, *Gilead*, p. 269.

¹⁷ Robinson, *Gilead*, p. 150.

Ames' reflection itself is that kind of holy act, finding a theological meaning that comes as the sum of a whole life of attending to the different thought of other persons- his brother and father, his wife and son, Feuerbach and Calvin.¹⁸

Ames' ministry is one in which there is deep tolerance of difference and acceptance of the provisionality of language about belief, but also a seeking out of meaning in the pursuit of holiness through engagement with the thoughts and lives of others. By presenting the interior life of Ames, Robinson offers the reader a perspective on faith and ministry which is beyond argument but is rooted in experience and relationship. There is holiness in Ames' struggle to be reconciled to Jack, mediated through the literary and biblical tropes of allusion, analogy and image, all open to further interpretation. This resonates with Torrance's drawing on his father's writing on order in terms of the life of the Church:

The Church is sent into history to live out its new life in the form of a servant under the law...not to be legalized in its life, but to use the patterns and forms of the law of this age in the service of its new life in the risen and ascended Lord. Thus *all order* in the historical Church is essentially *ambiguous* because it is order in the overlap of two ages....., ambivalent and provisional.¹⁹

In *Gilead*, T.F. Torrance's fears about granting "finality, self-justification and inflexible institutional forms to ministry at any one period"²⁰ are effectively and resolutely quashed in the presentation of the ministry of John Ames. The result is a ministry which reflects a holding together of grace and truth, a meaningful holiness rooted in the complexity of human relationships, and an engagement with theological thought through the ages. Although the novel is not overtly Christological, that Ames' ministry is firmly grounded in the life of the risen Christ is highlighted in the scene when he movingly reminds his congregation of his belief that "Christ is himself the pastor of his people and a faithful presence among them

¹⁸ Amy Hungerford, *Postmodern Belief: American Religion and Literature since 1960* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010) p. 115.

¹⁹ T.F. Torrance, *Conflict and Agreement in the Church* Vol. 2 (London: Lutterworth Press, 1960), p. 18, quoted in Iain R. Torrance, "Thomas F. Torrance's Theology of Ministry", pp. 525-6.

²⁰ Torrance, "Thomas F. Torrance's Theology of Ministry", p. 526.

through all generations”.²¹ As a narrative model from which those offering theological education for ministry might learn, and to which those undergoing such education might aspire, it could scarcely be bettered.

A final aspect of ministry explored by the novel is that of blessing. In his *Expository Times* article, Iain Torrance recounts his father’s response to his concerns arising from the early days of his ministry in Shetland: “He [TFT] simply said, ‘You are ordained to bless the people in the name of God’”,²² and offered G.W. Sprott’s understanding of the Benediction as “God’s answer to our worship, and as its proper close.” For Sprott, in the Benediction, “God’s Ministers put His name upon the people, and He blesses them. [Thus] a blessing is...imparted from on high, through the channel of an ordained ministry.”²³ Iain offers this as an entry point to his father’s understanding of ministry which, as already noted, involves a sharing in the new order brought about by Jesus Christ, and an obedience to his example and nature, rooted in servanthood and orientated towards blessing.

For Ames, blessing is certainly closely entwined with ordained ministry. At the pivotal moment of reconciliation at the end of the book, when Ames blesses Jack using the “beautiful...expressive...sufficient”²⁴ words from the benediction from Numbers 6.24-26, he comments that “I’d have gone through seminary and ordination and all the years intervening for that one moment”.²⁵ Ames presents himself as a channel of God’s blessing, noting “the

²¹ Robinson, *Gilead*, p. 147. Professor David Fergusson kindly drew my attention to the significance of this quotation.

²² Torrance, “Thomas F. Torrance’s Theology of Ministry”, p. 522.

²³ G.W. Sprott, *The Worship and Offices of the Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh: Blackwood & Sons, 1882), p. 45, quoted in Torrance, “Thomas F. Torrance’s Theology of Ministry”, p. 522.

²⁴ Robinson, *Gilead*, p. 275.

²⁵ Robinson, *Gilead*, p. 276.

limits of [his own] powers, whatever they are”.²⁶ But there is a reciprocity in the scene which goes beyond Sprott’s ecclesial understanding. Robinson elaborates on this in her interview with Rebecca Painter:

the blessing Ames gives Jack is an act of recognition that blesses Ames, too. He is profoundly moved that he has had the occasion to do that, that Jack accepted it, wanted it. I really do believe that all blessing is mutual, and that the moment of blessing is when people rise to the very beautiful seriousness of what they are...the wonder of the universe, incomparably complex, brilliant, poignant- and perverse, of course....But there are good grounds for awe in any human encounter.²⁷

Blessing as the moment of recognition of awe in a human encounter goes beyond the confines of ordained ministry, although, in the novel, this holy moment is indeed mediated by a minister to the reader. The focus, however, is on the ubiquity of the potential for blessing in all lived experience.

In an episode from much earlier in the narrative, blessing and sacrament are held together and related to the physical experience of the other.²⁸ Ames describes having preached on Jesus’ words in Mark’s Gospel, “Take ye: this is my body”. He has departed from his normal practice of not preaching on the words of Institution, which he had originally adopted because the Sacrament itself “is the most beautiful illumination of them there could be”. This Sunday, however, he had been thinking “a great deal about the body...blessed and broken”, and had used the story of Jacob wrestling with an angel from Genesis 32. He explains: “I had wanted to talk about the gift of physical particularity and how blessing and sacrament are mediated through it”. In this sacred moment of interlaced words, sacrament

²⁶ Robinson, *Gilead*, p. 275.

²⁷ Rebecca M. Painter, “Further Thoughts on A Prodigal Son who Cannot Come Home, on Loneliness and Grace: An Interview with Marilynne Robinson”, *Christianity and Literature* 58.3 (Spring 2009), pp. 485-492, p. 490.

²⁸ The episode is from Robinson, *Gilead*, p. 79.

and mystery, Ames gives his son, his flesh and blood, communion from his own hands. The mutuality of the blessing of the experience (and it is so significant, Ames comments to his son that “you may remember this”, giving the moment a similar status to that of the scene in the Upper Room), is clearly established. But what might be overlooked is that the encounter is enabled by Ames’ wife. She brings their son to the place where blessing is made visible, the communion table at the end of the service, and offers the insight to Ames that “You ought to give him some of that”. The physical and spiritual mystery on which he had preached and reflected is defined in the starkest terms as “that”. As effectively as Ames, his wife mediates grace and blessing through encounter with lived experience. As we have already noted, it is she who first blesses Jack as they share their hopes on the porch, a scene which is as profound and mutually revelatory as Ames’ blessing of Jack at the bus stop. The novel presents an understanding of divine blessing experienced in human encounter which is certainly encompassed within ordained ministry. But it is not confined there, and the lived, relational experience of others may enable blessing in sacred spaces of all kinds.

In a recent Diary piece in the *Guardian Weekend* magazine, Howard Jacobson reflects on benediction in the current age through the medium of Jimmy McGovern’s drama serial “Broken” shown on the BBC.²⁹ Here, he comments, it is as though a “long-forgotten language has been revived”, in which the words spoken by the priest in the drama, “God bless you”, “dispense[...] a benignity” not just on the congregation who hear it, “but on the whole devastated community” in which the story is set. Jacobson goes on, almost liturgically, “God bless you, because no-one else will. God bless you, because the very idea of blessedness is once again a necessity. God bless you, because- God knows- we’ve tried

²⁹ Howard Jacobson, “Has Jimmy McGovern’s Broken redeemed religion for our times?”, *The Guardian Weekend*, 15th July 2017, p. 69.

saying everything else.” Experiencing such an act of blessing undermines sceptical judgementalism. Instead, for the non-believer Jacobson, it prompts the insight that “[i]t’s imagining the way life presses on people, not scorning the choices they make, that’s divine”. Themes shared here with Ames in *Gilead* include the mutuality of blessing, through imaginative connection, but also an awareness of the worth of the physical, and its ability to provoke awe: life “presses” on people, but connecting with them is “divine”. It may be an ordained person who speaks the words in the drama, but the effect goes beyond the narrowly religious, and extends to all in need, whether they understand or accept it or not.

Literature and drama have offered insights into a wider understanding of blessing than is offered in the narrower confines of theological discussion.³⁰ Neither takes away from the intellectual, historical reflection needed by those in theological training about the importance of blessing, and the significance of a calling to be channels of God’s blessing in the world, and in the context of worship in particular. But reading lived theology through the arts in this way certainly lifts it out of the world of the functional and into a place where imagination may be engaged and new possibilities explored and tested, as Torrance had invited his hearers in Princeton to attempt. Perhaps the work of Robinson, McGovern and Jacobson need to find their way onto more faculty and seminar reading lists, if religion is indeed to be redeemed for our times.

³⁰ A similar point is made, in metanarrative terms, in Robinson’s novel, when she has Ames read the book, *The Trail of the Lonesome Pine*, which had so moved his wife. The book charts the successful relationship between an older man and a younger woman. Ames comments that “[i]t strikes me that your mother could not have said a more heartening word to me by any other means than she did by loving that unremarkable book so much I noticed and read it, too. That was providence telling me what she could not have told me” (*Gilead*, p. 151). There is blessing in this interaction between providence, loving, authentic relationships, and literature.

In his article on the theological and educational context of John Oman, Alan Sell comments that “we might say that Oman’s whole life was a response to the challenge posed by his loved and revered College Principal, John Cairns: ‘The best apology for Christianity is a life which makes the supernatural visible to ourselves and others.’”³¹ The legacy of theological educators in the Scottish tradition is long and inspiring, full of lives which make visible the supernatural in diverse ways. The best, among whom I include Iain Torrance, have ascribed to a method of teaching which nurtures deep knowledge of theology rather than “knowledge about”. The novel *Gilead*, for which Iain and I have such respect, presents a minister who has been read by many as making the supernatural visible in his reflections on his life, and thus offering a powerful apology for Christianity. As Robinson has written:

I love loyalty and trust, and courtesy, and kindness, and sensitivity. They are beautiful things in my mind. They require alertness and self-discipline and patience. And they are qualities that sustain my interest in my characters.³²

I have argued that the character of John Ames presents something graceful and true about Christianity, and that engaging with his narrative might move theological education away from the merely functional and into the world of imaginative possibilities. It is a direction which I trust Iain Torrance would approve of and enjoy.

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³¹ Alan P.F. Sell, “Living in the Half Lights: John Oman in Context”, p. 145. The quotation is from Alexander R. MacEwan, *Life and Letters of John Cairns, DD, LLD* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1895), p. 562.

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